

'Paroling the prison system'

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America is a land of stark contrasts. The richest of the rich share the land with the poorest of the poor, our smartest engineers and doctors walk the streets with high school dropouts.

And in this land of great freedoms, we lock up more people now than ever before.

Last week, a new study reported that 2.3 million Americans began the year behind bars; that's more than one in every 100 adult Americans. We lead the world in both number and percentage of people in jail or prison. Even China, with its repressive government and population of 1.7 billion, imprisons fewer people.

The cost of keeping so many Americans behind bars is astounding. The report, compiled by the Pew Center on the States, calculates that the federal government--with fewer than 10 percent of all prisoners--forks over more than \$5 billion annually; states are shelling out a whopping \$50 billion every year.

California spends nearly \$8.8 billion each year on its corrections system, the most in the nation. That works out to 8.6 percent of the state's total general fund expenditure, putting us fifth in the nation and ahead of Texas. California also leads the country in its number of prisoners, locking up more than 175,000 individuals.

What are we missing out on with so many billions of dollars going to our prisons? Education, for one. The Pew report finds that for every dollar California spends on higher education, it spend 83 cents on corrections. That's up from only 32 cents in 1987. Considering the fact that receiving a good education is one of the best ways to stay out of prison, it seems our spending priorities need a major rethinking.

But the pocketbook isn't the only victim. A steady trickle of research has turned an eye toward how society is affected by the vast number of prisoners who return to our streets each year. The number is shocking: nearly 700,000 men and women are released from prison every year. That's up from about 500,000 a decade ago.

Christy Visher from the Urban Institute, a non-partisan think tank in Washington, has led a team of researchers for the past several years on this very issue. She has found that stable housing and employment are critical in the reintegration process, but very few former prisoners are lucky enough to have either. Most prisoners end up returning to the same neighborhoods, friends and vices where they first ran into trouble. And the lack of counseling services only compounds the problem.

The situation is particularly bad among black men. One in 15 black men over the age of 18 are in jail or prison; for 20- to 34-year-olds, that number is a jaw-dropping one in nine. We're seeing an entire generation of young black men who will have spent time in prison, away from their families and children. Something must be done.

But what? We're seeing some movement in the right direction in the judicial system. Courts are taking a second look at problems with our sentencing process. Judges are being given more flexibility in how they hand out sentences, often using alternative sentences such as counseling or supervision that have been proven to be just as effective as prison time. Congress is also considering some changes, including a possible law to correct the imbalance between sentences for powder and crack cocaine.

Researchers have some other ideas. How we deal with individuals who leave prison is one area where we have a lot of work to do. Ensuring that ex-prisoners have a job, a stable place to live and health care are important tactics when attempting to keep them from reentering prison. If we can cut down our rates of recidivism, we'll not only have fewer prisoners, we'll also have more stable families and safer neighborhoods.

It's a no-brainer that we must keep dangerous individuals off the street. We must have a robust, well-funded police force with all the resources required. But we must make sure our policies match our values. The last 20 years have seen vast increases in the number of people in prison, and sentences are also being increased, even for non-violent crimes.

Our prison system is meant to confine, but also to rehabilitate. But unless the entire system is focused on this goal, it will be impossible to reach. We need to break the cycle of imprisonment in this country, and the only way we can do that is direct more resources to programs that assist inmates and tackle the root causes of crime: poverty, drug abuse and education.